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Thinking Spatially and Moving towards the Material: A Essay on *Seeking Spatial Justice* by Edward Soja

Gabriel Huddleston

*Now main streets whitewashed windows and vacant stores
Seems like there ain't nobody wants to come down here no more
They're closing down the textile mill across the railroad tracks
Foreman says these jobs are going boys and they ain't coming back to
Your hometown, your hometown, your hometown, your hometown*

—Bruce Springsteen, “My Hometown” (1984)

While the circumstances in my hometown might not be as dire as the ones Bruce describes, the stakes are certainly as high. A large factory closing years ago never fully replaced, a devastating flood, empty storefronts, the Wal-Mart effect, all are signs and contributing factors to the changing landscape of the town in which I grew up and currently reside. In spite of these conditions, hope remains. A new Armed Forces Reserve Center’s construction holds the promise of a boost to the local economy, locally owned and managed restaurants are often full, and the possible construction of a new public library, provide examples of a small town on the verge of a rebirth. However, such progress is not without controversy. Perhaps the most contentious rhetoric revolves around a new library.

Following the story of the new library in the local paper, there appear to be two separate discussion points. The first is whether or not to even build a new library, as the current one could simply be renovated. The second is where a possible new library should be located. While the minutiae of the discussions are not important here, what is important is how this situation illuminates insights into spatial theory and, more specifically, Edward Soja’s (2010) *Seeking Spatial Justice*. Indeed, such juxtaposition offers a starting point for a much larger discussion revolving around putting theory into practice and the difficulties that lie therein.

The library has come to represent much more than a building as the discourse surrounding it touches on city planning, small town America, class, government services, and education. Until recently, the location was between two sites, one in the

town's "downtown" (as much as a small town can have a downtown) and the other near the interstate where most of the commercial real estate and the high school is located. Proponents of the downtown location say that a new library could be the centerpiece of a revitalization of downtown, which is sorely needed. Others say that a downtown location would severely limit the library's accessibility for those who need its services the most (The library board has since decided to only focus its energies on securing the downtown location). All of this back and forth might be moot if the public cannot be convinced that a new library should be built at all as the decision is up for public referendum.

My hometown's new library was at the forefront of my mind as I read Soja's work. While Soja's examples are of a much larger scale than mine, at their core, they serve the same purpose. That is, how space socially and politically works upon people and vice versa. He writes:

This definitive struggle over geography can be best understood from an assertive spatial perspective, one that emphasizes what can be described as the explanatory power of the consequential geographies of justice. Stated differently, these consequential geographies are not just the outcome of social and political processes, they are also a dynamic force affecting these processes in significant ways. (p. 2)

Indeed, the essential part of this book is Soja's ability to ground spatial theory in the material, showing practical examples of how space and urban planning work upon people.

Soja's aim with this book is twofold. The first is clearly stated in the title of the book itself. Soja is looking to stake out a firm starting place to seek and strive for social justice, specifically in spatial terms. However, to do so, he reasserts what seems to be the overall project of his work, to think and theorize spatially as a needed addition to other modes of social critique. Soja writes,

The time has come, so to speak, to rebalance this ontological triad, to see that all forms of knowledge production, from epistemology to theory formation, empirical analysis, and practical application are always simultaneously and interactively social, historical, and spatial, at least *a priori*. (p. 71)

Soja suggests that to seek spatial justice, one must begin from this new theoretical ground—a foundation of the social, historical and the spatial. The question is who needs to take this charge seriously: those seeking spatial justice, those engaging in spatial oppression (or simply blocking spatial justice achievement), or both? By thinking spatially, do those of us who fight for social justice gain an advantage in our constant struggle or does spatial awareness amongst all increase the likelihood of the same outcomes?

To begin to answer this question it would be helpful to layer upon this rebalanced ontological triad a cultural studies approach vis-à-vis Stuart Hall (1996). As the discursive turn before, the spatial turn, at the very least, offers new perspective on something that was, heretofore, statically defined. Given this, once these new

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perspectives are taken up, the definition of space not only changes, but the entire lexicon of geography and the world it means to define and describe changes in meaning. Soja's aim of this book is that such a radical change opens a greater possibility for social justice. The static definitions of the world around us become fluid and where social justice seemed impossible, spaces of possibility emerge. In this sense, it reminds me of Stuart Hall's work in regards to encoding and decoding. To quickly summarize, Hall contends the meaning of media messages are not static, but rather, while they might be originally encoded with one intentioned meaning, this does not guarantee such a meaning will be received by the perspective audience (decoded). Additionally, this work theorizes how dominant hegemonic meanings are encoded and decoded. More specifically, Hall is looking at whether the audience decodes the message closely to the intended hegemonic meaning, thereby indicating the audience is operating within that hegemonic structure. A second type of decoding is the negotiated position, which recognizes the message as a larger hegemonic claim, but at the same time adapts such a message to account for the decoder's contextualized understandings. Finally, Hall suggests a third decoding, which rejects wholly the hegemony represented in the message. Hall contends that this reading is a resistant one that might include a deeper understanding of the hegemonic forces at work.

To think in this critically spatial way, both ontologically and epistemologically, means to encode space with a certain meaning. Soja's thread throughout the book is the successful "class action lawsuit brought against the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) by a coalition of grassroots organizations" (Soja, 2010, p. vii)—this action defines space with new meaning that includes special attention to social justice. In other words, the legal victory encodes space in a way that strengthens the overall spatial justice project by envisioning urban planning not just as another step in the temporal march of capitalism, but rather as a means to benefit the least advantaged citizens of the city by considering seriously the way space works in a socioeconomic manner. Due to the material effects of the lawsuit, this newly encoded meaning of space, more specifically urban planning, is imbued with social justice language thereby allowing for social justice to be in the discourse with/against the dominantly defined meaning. In doing so, the dominant position becomes noted for its lack of social justice and can be criticized because of it. In other words, to think in the spatial way Soja outlines is to problematize a bedrock of how we make sense of the world around us—and this might be the answer to the question I raised earlier, strategic spatial thinking for those seeking social justice or increased spatial awareness for all? In other words, the benefits of troubling traditional notions of space are too great to save for an enlightened few.

Soja's point here is that by rebalancing the way we think of the world with a more critically aware notion of space, one cannot help but to decode dominant cultural messages in a counter-hegemonic way, or at the very least, in a negotiated way that allows for the contrasting of the local against the global. Does the lawsuit itself or

critical geography, as outlined by Soja, guarantee such decodings? No, it is likely that these victories continue to be seen within the dominant hegemonic structure, branded as infringements on the rights of corporations and thereby attacks on capitalism itself. And yet, the L.A. lawsuit had meaningful, material effects that begin to place spatial justice on an equal plane with abstract notions equity and fairness. Therefore, spatial awareness with an eye towards material consequences makes it more likely for social justice to gain a foothold in a larger political struggle.

This is the guiding light that Soja provides. To think spatially is not enough. Spatial thinking must always seek ways to ground itself in the material. For example the debate around my hometown's new library represents a localized, community decision somewhat shielded from the neoliberal forces at play in urban planning and therefore making it an ideal place where the effects of spatial thinking grounded in the material could be easier to identify. Instead of the debate discussing the usual suspects of taxes and politics, it could focus on the socially material effects the library would have on the towns' residents. On face value, this might seem easily done, but the steady stream of letters to the editor of the local paper that focus solely on the costs of building the library say otherwise. Proponents for the new library should look for ways to make their argument outside of this tired debate and instead begin to think critically about space in way that inspires action beyond a simple voter referendum. For example, a downtown library branch could have a greater impact on the underserved, poorer areas of town. Such a discussion might galvanize the community to think beyond cost and towards a broader definition of the community itself. When this happens, the possible courses of action expand beyond what has become the taken-for-granted typical means. To return this point to Hall, if the messages in favor of building the library are originally encoded with social justice, the decoding of these same messages will, at the very least, have to contend with these ideas. Social justice ideas may be dismissed or watered down in the eventual decoding by those who decide the library's fate, but they will have to make sense of such ideas. A recent letter to the editor provides such an example,

I have carefully read the reasons posted in the *Daily Journal* for not wanting to support the library. One thing I notice is that they are very personal reasons, such as not wanting to have additional taxes, the belief that libraries are no longer needed, or that they just don't think it is the right time to build a library. From the point of view of the individual, these may make sense, but they miss the point of making a small personal investment for the greater good of our community. (Matthews, 2012)

Critical geography offers a sharp contrast to the current neoliberal discourse that swallows whole any nuanced notions of space by defining it in terms of the bottom line and how it serves the free market. As an educational scholar, I have seen the similar effects neoliberalism has had on the education discourse—pushing aside the material effects of poverty on education for pie-in-the-sky theories of accountability and high-stakes testing. Schools, while often symbolic of the local, have

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become increasingly pulled towards a more global scale, subjugated to neoliberal, free-market reforms (Helfenbein, 2011). We should both unify localized opposition to such reforms and limit their influence through spatial awareness because it runs counter to neoliberalism's attempt to open public school districts as new markets of investment and exploitation. Such a counter becomes even more powerful when those with spatial awareness seek to apply it in a concrete, meaningful way. By opening the public to business interests, neoliberalism forecloses the discussion of schools in terms of capitalism. The application of spatial awareness can reframe the debate to include ideas of social justice and community. To return to Springsteen's lyrics, the closing of factories in small communities happen because such actions are only seen in terms of the bottom line, not on how it will affect those who live in the shadows of the smokestacks. Neoliberalism's effect on how we view space is a *fait accompli*, as it guarantees the success of industry over the concerns of the community. Springsteen (2012) hints at this in his most recent album in a track entitled, *Death to My Hometown*

No shells ripped the evening sky
No cities burning down
No armies stormed the shores for which we'd die
No dictators were crowned
High off on a quiet night
I never heard a sound
The marauders raided in the dark and brought death to my hometown, boys
Death to my hometown.

To think spatially is the kernel of a move towards social justice, but the full effects will not be felt unless an application of such thinking is done. In reaction to the current economic crisis Soja writes,

There is little doubt that the crash of 2008 marked a crucial turning point in these restructuring processes and that new directions of change are likely to be set in motion, but what we have learned from the *application* [italics added] of a critical spatial perspective has the potential for stimulating continuing innovation and perhaps unexpected breakthroughs in the search for greater social and spatial justice. (p. 192)

The word application is the key to critical spatial awareness having the impact that Soja believes it can. I am not one to return us to the age-old debate of theory versus practice and so, to avoid the particulars of that (sometimes useful) rabbit hole, critical spatial awareness should *by definition* include working towards the material.

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